

This Time of Year, It's Meant For Two by Tea_Bee

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Summary:

Eddie accidentally tells his mom he's bringing home a boyfriend, and she doesn't believe him.

Richie writes a Craigslist ad offering to be someone's fake S.O. in exchange for a home cooked holiday meal.

I mean, we all know where this is going, right?

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Title is from Present Without A Bow by Kacey Musgraves

Eddie picked up his ringing phone and hit 'answer' without looking at the caller ID. Rookie mistake. "Hello?"

"Eddie-Bear," his mother's grating voice warbled over the speaker. "I'm glad I caught you, you always seem to be too busy to take my calls nowadays, I think they're working you too hard at the new firm." She'd been saying that for the 5 years since he'd transferred half an hour out of Derry and she couldn't keep as close an eye on him.

"No, ma, I'm fine. I am on my way out the door, though, what do you need?" Eddie pulled his jacket on, balancing the phone between his ear and his shoulder.

"It's awfully cold to be going out, don't you think?" She said, disapproving as always. "Make sure you wear a jacket, and bring an extra. And gloves, and a scarf. And a hat, and maybe also earmuffs, do you still have the pair I sent you last year?"

He waited until she finished rambling off cold weather gear. "Yes, I have them." Still in the package, in the closet. "Did you need to talk about something? You usually don't call this late."

"Oh! Of course, I almost forgot. Your aunts and uncle are coming to

stay in Derry for Christmas, and we're having dinner here at the house. Five o'clock, Christmas day. You'll be there, of course," she said in the simpering tone that she knew he wouldn't say no to. "But I wanted to ask if you were going to bring that nice girl from work along with you? The one you've been seeing?"

"What? I'm not seeing any girl from work." He stopped with his hand on the doorknob, wary.

"You've mentioned her before, Myra, isn't it?"

"I..." He sighed and rubbed a hand over his face. "I mentioned Myra *once*, ma. *Two* years ago. Because we worked on a project together. Not because we're dating, you know we aren't." He couldn't believe he was having this conversation with her again. Coming out once wasn't enough for Sonia Kaspbrak, no. He'd had to convince her over and over again over the years, and it's starting to wear his patience very thin.

"I don't see why not, Eddie-bear, she seems like a nice girl."

"Ma. You know I'm not seeing any women, from work or otherwise. I've told you this so many times. You know I'm gay." He slumped against the closed door, so completely done.

"Oh, well. You can't *know that*, though, you just haven't found the right woman to take care of you. Maybe if you invite Myr-

"Ma! I do know, okay? I've always known. I know it's not what you expected, not what you had planned, whatever, but I am who I am and I need you to accept that. What if I brought a boyfriend home for Christmas, huh? How would you act then? I'm still your son, and the person I love would deserve your respect no matter what, because you love me, right?" He half expected this to be the straw that broke the camel's back, that she'd snap and he wouldn't be invited to Christmas after all, and he wasn't sure how upset he'd be about that, to be completely honest.

"But Eddie, honey, *you don't have a boyfriend.*" She sounded so smug that he couldn't help what he said next.

"Yes, I do." He snapped out, before realizing what he'd said.

"Oh, yeah? And how long have you been dating this *man* you've never mentioned?" She still sounded like she was winning somehow, and he couldn't take it.

"About, uh, eight months now?"

"And you never thought to tell me?"

"Well, frankly, you haven't been particularly interested in my actual love life since I came out, Ma," he complained.

"Well, I'm interested now, dear." She almost sounded sincere, and then, smugly, she asked, "What's his name?"

Shit. Fuck. Dammit. He couldn't say any of his friends' names, she knew them all and the only ones that would apply would be Bill and Stan, who were already dating each other, or Ben, who was tragically straight but would do it if he wasn't such a bad liar. Bill would have been easiest to fake it with, they've known each other since they were kids and they've always been close, but Sonia knew he was taken, she'd lamented about him being the reason Eddie is gay on the few times she'd actually deigned to acknowledge him coming out. He knew he'd been silent too long, but he couldn't come up with a name. "I really want you to meet him in person, why don't we keep it a little bit of a surprise?" It was a reach, and it probably wouldn't work, but it's all he could think to say.

She scoffed. "If you're determined to keep me in the dark, Eddie, fine. But if you don't show up with this mysterious boyfriend of yours, I am going to think you're lying to me. You wouldn't lie to your mother, would you, Eddie-bear?"

He winced. "No, ma."

"Then we'll see you Christmas day?" She was giving him an out, but if he took it and showed up alone, she'd just talk about Myra, or some other girl she thought was perfect for him, for the entire night.

"Yes, ma. We'll be there. I have to go." He went through the usual hoops for a few more minutes to get her to finally hang up, then closed his eyes and sat down on the floor of his apartment entryway, leaning his head against the door and breathing deep and slow until his head stopped buzzing. He opened his eyes and dialed Stan's cell and waited for him to pick up. "Hey, sorry, my mom called as I was heading out, but I'll meet you guys at the bar in ten. I need your help

with something."

...

"Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck." He punctuated each word with the *thunk* of his forehead hitting the bar table. "Why did I tell her I'm seeing someone? I'm gonna show up alone and she'll *know* I was lying and she'll give me shit for it all night." He lifted his head off the table and looked at Stan, who somehow managed to look sympathetic and smug at the same time.

"You did this to yourself, Eddie," Stan shook his head, then looked up and smiled at his boyfriend as he came to the table carrying their most recent round of drinks from the bar.

Eddie took a large gulp of his drink, trying to get as drunk as possible as fast as he could, already well on his way from the two blessedly strong drinks he'd had previously. "You should be nicer to me, or I'll steal your man and take him to my mom's Christmas dinner and you'll be alone for the holidays."

Stan laughed, "You could certainly try." He leaned over and kissed Bill as he took his drink. "Thanks, hon." Bill smiled at him and sat down on the stool next to him, lacing their fingers together on the table.

Eddie groaned. "I don't know what to do, you guys, she's just going to keep pulling this shit if I don't show up with a guy. I thought about finding someone to fake it, but I only know one person besides the two of you that I could even think of asking, and Ben is a *terrible* liar."

He took too big a drink and had to press his thumb to the top of his mouth to get rid of the brain-freeze from the frozen fruit and liquor.

"Wait," Bill chimed in. "We just did an article, I mean a p-puff piece, really, but Audra at the paper found this ad on Craigslist, this guy is apparently too far from his family to go home for the holidays, so he's offering to be people's fake date in exchange for nothing but a holiday m-m-meal."

"What, some weirdo? No thanks." Eddie rolled his eyes and slurped at the last of his drink, the last of the liquid gurgling at the bottom of his cup before Stan pulled it away abruptly. "Hey!"

"I hate that noise." Stan rolled his eyes as Eddie stuck his tongue out at him.

Bill tried to reign in the conversation, "No, she had him in to the offices for an interview for the piece and he seemed pretty normal. Ss-sort of goofy, but nice." He pulled up the article on his phone and handed it to Eddie.

Alone this holiday season? Hire local comedian to be your fake boyfriend! - Article by Audra Phillips

The holiday season is in full swing and, if you're anything like me, so is the full court press from all your family members about your dating life(Or lack thereof). Want to skip that long, insulting conversation about how you're still single? About how your parents really want grandchildren? Well, look no further than Richie Tozier! The twenty-eight year old local bartender and comedian posted this ad on Craigslist last

week:

I am a 28 year old bisexual comedian with no college degree, a bartender part time, and I drive a '97 Geo Metro covered in bumper stickers of varying hilarity(and offensiveness depending on who you ask). I can play anywhere between the ages of 20 and mid thirties depending on if I shave and/or actually sleep the night before. If you'd like to have me as your fake date for the winter holiday of your choice, but have me pretend to be in a very long or serious relationship with you, specifically to torment your family(or just to get them off your back), I'm game.

I can do one or more of the following things, at your request:

- *Openly hit on other guests of any gender while you act like you don't notice.*
- *Start instigative discussions about politics and/or religion.*
- *Stare down your parent/relative while they say Grace and refuse to participate*
- *Pretend to be really drunk as the evening goes on(I don't drink, but I used to. A lot. I know the drill).*
- *Start an actual, physical fight with a family member, either inside or on the front lawn for all the neighbors to see.*
- *Pretend to sneak off with you to hook up and make over the top obnoxious fake sex noises.*
- *Have very very bad table manners(May not have to fake this one, tbh)*
- *Be overly affectionate*
- *Swear constantly(Yeah this one may not be optional)*

- *Propose to you in front of everyone.*
- *Sample everything that's being cooked with the same utensil, without even rinsing the utensil in between.*

Message me to meet up and discuss details. I require no pay but the free meal I will receive as a guest of your family! This must include dessert. If the above antics cause us to get booted pre-dessert, you will have to buy me one.'

I don't know about you, but that certainly sounds tempting. We even had him swing by for a quick interview, and let me tell you, this tall drink of water is actually quite the catch.

"Yeah, my parents live in Florida now, and I just don't have the funds to go see them this year. My friend Bev came up with the idea for the ad one night when I was complaining about not having a home cooked meal for the holidays. It was either this or risk burning down my apartment, I'm not the best cook. She actually wrote it with me, too, or it wouldn't be so coherent." Says Tozier. "I'll pretty much fake date anyone for a free dessert."

For someone who's resorting to posting an ad on Craigslist in an attempt to have a family holiday, Richie is funny and sweet, and seems like a pretty normal human(we've all heard the Craigslist horror stories, guys). Hard to believe he doesn't have someone to spend his time with! Take this man up on his offer and you might end up with more than you bargained for. Can you imagine telling your children years from now how you hired their father as a holiday farce but ended up falling madly in love over a piece of pumpkin pie? Sounds like something out of a fairytale.

"Well, that's... I couldn't take a stranger home, though, it wouldn't work." Eddie worried his bottom lip between his teeth, looking at the picture of Richie Tozier attached to the article. He was smiling, his eyes crinkled behind thick-framed glasses. The guy was cute, actually. Not that that was the point.

"Maybe message him and meet up and see if he can act like he likes you, dude, what are your other options?" Stan reasoned.

"Fine," Eddie sighed and opened his phone, plugging in the link for the ad and shooting off a quick, probably barely coherent message. He knew he wouldn't have even considered doing this if he hadn't been drinking, but Christmas was only a week away and he was also desperate. "We'll see what happens, I guess."

Notes for the Chapter:

Let me know what you think so far! Next chaoter should be up by the end of the week, I'm aiming for 3 or 4 chapters, all of them in the next two weeks or so. Please comment, kudos, and stay tuned!

Bee

2. Chapter 2

Eddie: He's still not here. It's been 15 minutes, what do I do?

Ben: I'm sure he'll be here soon.

Eddie: Thanks for coming, I know it's weird to sit at the bar while I'm at a table but what if he turned out to be some weirdo and tried to kidnap me?

Ben: I really doubt that would happen, but you're welcome.

Eddie looked up from his phone and watched the door as it opened, sighing when a fashionable red-haired woman walked in instead of the person he was waiting so anxiously for. Finally, just as the door started to swing shut, a large hand stopped it and a tall man with unruly dark brown hair wearing a vintage The Cure Wish Tour shirt and ripped jeans. Eddie recognized him from his picture and stood abruptly, before realizing that seemed too eager and sitting back down just as quickly. His chair made a loud scraping noise as he sat too hard and Richie looked over at him and raised his eyebrows. Eddie cleared his throat and waved at him. He was way cuter in person than in the picture from the article, and also way taller than Eddie'd expected.

"Hey, uh... Eddie, right?" He put a hand on the back of the chair opposite him, pulling it out to sit down.

"Yeah," Eddie smiled and held out a hand to shake. "Richie Tozier?"

"The one and only," he sat down, tapping his hands on the table. They sat in slightly awkward silence until the waitress came over and took their orders. As she left, Richie broke the silence. "So-

"Is this weird? I feel like this is weird." Eddie interrupted, chuckling.

"It is a little, I guess. But it doesn't have to be. We can just talk about why you need a fake boyfriend, because honestly, I'm having a hard time believing you don't already have a real one." Richie smirked at him, checking him out jokingly.

Eddie scoffed. "My mom doesn't believe I'm gay. I've told her about 80 times, but she still thinks I'm dating any girl I mention in passing. It's ridiculous, but my mom has always been pretty ridiculous so I guess I shouldn't be surprised."

Richie frowned, "That's not fair, you shouldn't have to deal with that, she's your mom. She should just love you, and want you to be happy."

"I- Yeah, I guess. I mean, she does, I just don't think she gets it, but she was fine with me bringing a boyfriend instead of a girlfriend when I said I was going to, so..." He trailed off. She hadn't really been fine with it, she'd just known he was lying and wanted to call his bluff. "Anyway, I told her I was bringing someone I'd been seeing for a while, and I would have asked a friend, but I only have like three people I'd trust to do it, and two of them are already dating each other and the other is," He gestured to Ben at the bar before realizing Richie might find it weird that he had a friend sitting at the bar and watching them.

“At the bar making sure I’m not a creep who’s gonna drag you to the sewers and murder you?” Richie smiled.

“Yeah, and very straight, and a horrible actor.” Eddie laughed, turning to look at Ben, who was talking to the red-head who’d come in earlier. “And apparently flirting with someone and paying no attention to whether or not I’m being dragged to the sewers and murdered.”

“Well if it helps, he’s flirting with my friend, Bev. I also brought along an insurance friend to make sure you didn’t lure me back to your place, roast me on a spit and eat me.” Richie winked at him, “Though I wouldn’t necessarily be opposed to the first thing.”

Eddie’s mouth dropped open and he let out an unattractive laugh-honk. “You’re funny.”

Richie’s eyes lit up, “Oh, my stars and garters, Eddie Spaghetti thinks I’m funny, what a dream come true!” He trilled in a silly Southern Belle accent.

“I take it back.” Eddie pressed his lips together and held back a smile. “And do not call me *Eddie Spaghetti* what the hell is *that*?”

“Aw, Eddie baby, how could you hurt me this way? My heart is broken. You’ve wounded me.” Richie pouted, and well, hell. Eddie couldn’t deny that he felt his heart beat a little harder because of it.

“Well, I guess I can just tell my mom we broke up, then, and face Christmas dinner on my own.” Eddie shrugged.

“No!” Richie reached out across the table for a second before pulling his hand back. “I mean, wouldn’t she think you’d just made me up?”

“I couldn’t have made you up if I tried, Richie.” Eddie said softly, shaking his head. “Um. So, speaking of Christmas dinner... How is this going to work? My mom’s place is about half an hour away, is that okay?”

“I mean, yeah. I can even drive if you think my shitty car will bug your mom?”

“Actually,” Eddie bit his lip. “You had some great wacky things on that list, and they would all be really funny, but I was sort of thinking you could just act like you like me?”

Richie blinked at him, “Oh.”

“I mean, just... be yourself. But also act affectionate, like we’ve been dating for eight months or so and we’re in love. Maybe hold my hand or put your arm around me or whatever. Be couple-y.”

“That doesn’t sound so hard. Just be cuddly and touchy-feely and kissy?” Richie tilted his head.

“Um. Yeah? If that’s okay. We don’t have to kiss, if you’re not comfortable with that.” Eddie could feel the tips of his ears warming and knew he was blushing hard. He coughed and reached for his water.

“I’d be fine with that.” Richie said quickly.

Eddie was a little taken aback. “Oh, okay. Cool.”

“Cool, yeah. Um,” Richie mirrored him, taking a quick drink of his own water. “So like, eight months? I should know things about you.” He looked up as the waitress came over to set their food in front of them, smiling and thanking her.

“Okay, what do you want to know?” Eddie took a bite of his salad and started thinking of answers to generic ‘get to know you questions’.

“Do you think a hot dog is a sandwich, and why or why not?”

Eddie choked on a chunk of cherry tomato. “*What?*” He picked up his water and washed down his food.

Richie laughed, his eyes sparkling. “Would you call a hotdog a sandwich or not? And why?”

“Um,” Eddie snorted as he laughed with him. “No. A sandwich is two slices of bread with fillings in the middle. A hotdog would be more of a filled bun, if anything.”

“What if I cut that bit that hinges the bun together, would it be a sandwich then?” Richie said.

“No? I don’t think so. It’s still meant to be one piece, so no. A hotdog is not a sandwich.” He narrowed his eyes at the man across from him.

“If one animal was made the size of an elephant, which would be the scariest?”

“Wh- I was expecting like, what’s your favorite color? What was the name of your first pet?” Eddie wrinkled his nose at Richie.

“What, am I trying to hack your password or something?” Richie shook his head and took a bite from his burger. “I’m peering into you soul, here.”

“With ‘Is a hot dog a sandwich’ and ‘What animal would be scary if it were huge?’ That’s gonna show you my soul?” He was intrigued, honestly. He’d never been asked these kinds of questions on a date before, and it was fun. This wasn’t even an actual date, but he was enjoying himself more than he had on a real date in years.

“Answer the question, Eds.”

"What animal would be the scariest if it were elephant sized? I'd say an ant. They can lift up to five thousand times their own weight, can you imagine if they were elephant-sized?" He couldn't keep the smile off his face. Acting like he and Richie liked each other wasn't going to be hard if it was always like this.

Richie was smiling, too, his eyes scrunching in the corners. "That does sound fucking awful. What's a really cheesy song you have memorized?"

"Uh, The Goonies 'R' Good Enough by Cyndi Lauper. Do I get to ask you questions at some point?" He pointed his fork faux-threateningly at Richie.

"You can do whatever you want, Spaghetti."

"Shit, you have good questions though, I can't think of anything good." Eddie pouted.

"I could just answer my own awesome questions," Richie laughed when Eddie glared at him. "Hey, your words, not mine."

"I said *good*. Not awesome." He corrected him.

"Sure, Eds, whatever you have to tell yourself to keep from falling in love with me." Richie took a drink of his water, not noticing Eddie

blushing. "Okay, let's dig a little deeper. If you were stranded on a deserted island and you could choose one person to keep you company, who would it be? And you can't say me. Even though I know you want to." He winked.

"In your dreams. No, I'd probably pick my friend Bill. We've known each other since we were kids, and I've always looked up to him. He's just a really capable guy, I think we'd get by." Eddie tilted his head when Richie grimaced. "What? Bad answer?"

"No, just trying not to get jealous of a hypothetical stranding situation. I know I said you couldn't say me, but you didn't even hesitate in your answer, it's like you had that one prepared. He must be a really good friend."

"He is, yeah. We've been through a lot together. He's like my big brother. I mean, he's only like 8 months earlier than me, but still." Eddie's cheeks were starting to hurt. He couldn't remember a time he'd smiled for an entire night like this. "What about you?"

"Me? Uh, probably my friend Mike, the guy has way too much knowledge for a normal person. Big nerd. He'd know exactly what plants were edible and what materials would make the best shelter without even having to think about it too hard. What's something you have to do on a regular basis that you wish could be automated?" He asked as he dipped a fry in a salt and pepper mix.

"Oh, easy. I hate cooking. It makes a mess, I'm not good at it, it's not worth it. I usually get food delivered or go out, so it's as low effort as I can get it without automating at this point, I think."

"Automating food is probably pretty far off, technology-wise. I feel like it never goes well in movies. I'd cook for you, though. Getting takeout can get pricey, and what if you're hungry in the middle of the night and nothing delivers?" Richie finished off his burger, and Eddie felt that giddy jump in his pulse again as he offered to cook for him, even jokingly.

"Okay, so my fake boyfriend does the cooking, I do the dishes. Sounds like a real partnership, my mom might buy it."

"Right. Yeah, sounds real. We'll totally fool her." The waitress came over with the check and Richie reached out and handed her his card before she could even put it on the table.

"Hey, wait, no. I was going to-" Eddie tried to wave her back over, but she was already gone.

"Nah, don't worry about it. I'm getting a whole Christmas dinner and dessert out of you, I can get dinner tonight." Richie pulled out his phone and handed it to Eddie. "Here, put your number in, it would be weird to not have it if we've been dating so long."

"Oh, sure." Eddie typed his number in and shot himself a quick text from Richie's phone so he'd be able to program him in later. Feeling his own phone buzz in his pocket, he handed the phone back across the table as the waitress came back, handing Richie his card and receipt. "At least let me take care of her tip, Rich."

"Okay, but I have one more question for you. What's something I'd never guess about you?" There was something soft and genuine about

Richie's smile this time.

Richie had been flirting jokingly with him all evening, and Eddie decided he could throw a little harmless flirtation back. "I have a tattoo," he said with a wink, and got up, taking his jacket from the back of the chair

Richie's jaw dropped and his eyes went wide as he stood. "What, *where?*"

"Nope, you said that was the last question, so that's your last answer. I'll text you later, set up a time for when we're gonna head out Christmas day?" Eddie gave him his most casual smile, like he hadn't just been flirting mercilessly, and revelled internally at how flustered Richie looked. Maybe his Christmas would be fun after all. He looked over at where Ben and Richie's friend Bev had been sitting at the bar, but their seats were empty. "Um. Looks like our friends left. Hope you're not gonna murder me now."

Richie finally tore his eyes from Eddie's face and looked at the bar before starting to laugh. "Oh my god. That bitch *would* leverage a real date out of my fake one. Fuck." He pulled out his phone, "Yeah. They went out for coffee a few blocks down." He held out his phone to show Eddie a slew of frantic texts from Bev about how sweet Ben was.

"She's right, he's pretty much the best person I know. Good for them." Eddie stuck his hands in his pockets and shrugged. "Well, I guess I'll see you in a couple days?"

"Yeah, definitely." Richie shuffled his feet. "Um. Yeah. Text me the details. I should get going, but this was... this went better than I thought it would when Bev and I were writing that ad, so thanks." He reached out and pulled Eddie into a hug so quickly he couldn't react, and then he was out the door.

Eddie didn't stop smiling all the way home.

Notes for the Chapter:

Is it just me or did that fake date feel uhhhhh a lot more real than they meant it to?

Please leave a comment to tell me what you thought! I'm working on the next chapter and I could definitely use the motivation.

Bee

3. Chapter 3

Eddie pulled up outside Richie's apartment building and sent him a text to let him know he was there. Within a few minutes, the lobby door opened and Richie came out, dressed in nice jeans and a soft-looking lilac knit sweater. Eddie swallowed as he watched him cross the sidewalk and reach for the car door. "Shit," he hadn't unlocked it, and Richie pulled at the handle right as he hit the button, struggling to open the door. "Hold on, I have to unlock it." He said loud enough for Richie to hear through the window.

Richie yanked at the handle again as Eddie pressed the button again, "Unlock the door." He was laughing. He was doing it on purpose.

"Stop fucking pulling on the handle!" They repeated the dance a few times before Eddie stopped trying to unlock the door and hit the gas, driving a few feet forward until he could see Richie's shocked face in the rearview at being left behind. He stopped the car again and unlocked the door as Richie jogged to his new spot and opened the door, ducking his head and sitting in the passenger seat.

"You were going to *leave me behind*? And here I thought we were supposed to be in love. What would your mother think if she saw that display back there, Eds?" Richie smiled at him and poked him in the shoulder over the center console.

"Are you going to be like this the whole drive down?" Eddie hoped so. He really enjoyed their back and forth. He hoped they'd still hang out after this whole fake boyfriend thing ended.

"Hey, you told me to be myself, remember?"

"I'm gonna regret that, aren't I?" He teased.

"I mean if you don't think your mom will buy that I'm someone you would date, I can be someone else." Richie said, looking out the window as Eddie started to pull away from the curb.

"That's not... no. No, I didn't mean it like that." Eddie stopped the car again. "I- You..." he sighed. "Hey." He put his hand on Richie's forearm on the armrest and watched him look down at it for a second before looking back up at him. "I was joking, I like... I-I like you the way you are."

Richie's mouth quirked up at the side like he didn't believe him for a second, and he shrugged.

"I was literally just thinking that I hope we can still hang out after this, I'm not fucking with you." He squeezed his arm before realizing he might be making Richie uncomfortable, and that he couldn't exactly escape this small space and the sincerity in Eddie's voice. He cleared his throat and moved his hand back to the steering wheel, looking back out the windshield and pulling away from the curb and saying in what he hoped was a more lighthearted tone, "I mean, from what I hear, Ben is already half in love with Beverly, so we're gonna see each other."

Richie laughed quietly, more of an exhale than a real sound, and Eddie frowned. He liked his real laugh. "Yeah, Bev wouldn't shut up about him the past couple of days." Richie said.

"Ben's been smiling non-stop. They've seen each other, what, every night since they met?" Eddie wasn't going to lie and tell himself he hadn't been just as giddy and smiling every time Richie had texted him since that night. But he wasn't going to say it out loud, either.

"Yeah, Bev's the same. I tried to steal her phone and she almost punched me in the teeth." He was smiling again, the moment passed, and they spent the first fifteen minutes of the drive fighting over the radio station and laughing at each other's singing voices. Then Richie cleared his throat and Eddie could feel him looking over. "So, um. How couple-y are we going to be tonight? I know we sort of talked about it the other night, but I just want to check. Boundaries and all that, I don't want to get too in your space if that's not something that you would do if this were real, you know?"

"I don't know what I would do if this were real, actually. I've never been in a real relationship for longer than around five months." Eddie admitted.

"I'm repeating myself and I know it but I find that really hard to believe."

"Oh, believe it. Something is always off, and I just... don't see the point in continuing things if I don't see it going somewhere. I'd rather be alone than with someone I don't see myself spending my life with, you know?" Eddie shrugged, keeping his eyes on the road but itching to look over. He drummed his fingers to the beat of the Counting Crows song playing on the radio to distract himself.

"Yeah. But can you really know that in five months or less?" He asked.

"I mean, not perfectly, but part of you just feels it from the beginning, you know? Something should click. And you build from there. Sometimes there's a click, but nothing builds from there, or sometimes you build and things fall apart. But at some point you just have to look at what you have and decide whether it's going to be something you want to work on with that person and build a future on, whether it's going to be a good foundation for a life together. And I guess I haven't really found that yet. I want to be able to laugh with someone, even when we're fighting, have that push and pull that keeps us on our toes, but also feels stable and warm and good and real. This is getting real deep for a car ride, but. Yeah. I don't know. Whatever." He reached down and changed the station.

"No, that makes a lot of sense. I don't usually get past the first few dates, really. I think I can just be a lot for people to handle, and maybe it's hard to follow or... I don't know, I say a lot of shit, I just want someone who can throw it back and keep up, and just. Actually enjoy my shitty jokes even if they pretend they don't."

"Your jokes aren't that bad." Eddie said, unsure whether he was just trying to make Richie feel better or starting to want to be someone to Richie. More than just hanging out after this. But that was a dangerous line to walk when Richie was only here to be Eddie's fake boyfriend, and he wasn't even sure if Richie would consider them friends at this point, let alone potentially anything else.

"I seem to recall you saying I was funny."

He could feel Richie's eyes on him again, and he took a deep breath. "You are." He smirked. "Funny *looking*, am I right?"

"Oh, Eds gets off a good one, ouch!" Richie laughed, finally looking away from Eddie and letting him relax. "Okay but we got off track when we got all deep there, how touchy-feely is too much? Like, what amount of PDA are you comfortable with in front of your family, that would still be convincing?"

"I think... I'm fine with whatever. I like to be physically close to people when I'm emotionally close to them. Even with my friends, I can be pretty tactile. How about this?" Eddie looked over at Richie as he pulled up to a stop light, keeping the red glow in his peripheral vision so he'd know when it changed. "If it feels organic, like you would touch me, or hold my hand, or cuddle, or, like... kiss me? If in the moment it feels like you would do something like that if we were really dating, just do it. Don't try to force it, or make it look too over-the-top, just... whatever feels right. You know?"

"Yeah. That sounds good." They looked at each other, the first time they'd made eye contact in almost half an hour, until Richie's lips curved into a small smile. "The light's green," he said without looking away from Eddie's eyes.

Eddie startled and looked at the road, starting to drive again. "Sorry."

"Are you nervous? Your family seems like a lot."

"Yeah, they definitely can be. My mom is... well, I've sort of told you. My aunts are okay, or maybe that's just because I don't see them often. They're my mom's sisters, by the way, and my uncle is my younger aunt's husband. Second husband, actually."

"What about your dad? And his family?" Richie asked quietly, like he was afraid he was overstepping.

"My dad passed away when I was really young. I don't really remember him much. I have pictures, but. It's not the same as really remembering." He shrugged, pulling into his mother's neighborhood. "We're almost there."

"I'm sorry, Eddie." He was still so quiet, and Eddie wished desperately that he could make him laugh again.

"It's fine. I still have people who are here for me every day, you know? Bill, and Stan, and Ben." He pulled to a stop in front of his mom's house.

"And me." Richie flinched when Eddie's head whipped around in surprise. "I mean, you said you wanted to keep hanging out, so I'll be around. If you want."

Eddie smiled. "Yeah, definitely." He felt like the air in the car had turned into sparks, but maybe that was just him. He looked past Richie toward the front door of his mom's house. "You ready?"

Richie turned and looked behind him for a second before looking at him again. "It looks like a normal house. Why do I get the feeling it's gonna chew us up and spit us back out in a couple hours?"

"Because it probably will. But I'm glad you're here, it would really

suck to be alone tonight. Thank you." He reached out and squeezed Richie's hand, felt his fingers curl around his own for a second before he turned and opened the car door.

He met Richie on the sidewalk and reached out and took his hand before walking toward the door.

"Wait, Eddie." He felt Richie stop and pull on his hand to turn him around. He looked up at him questioningly as he put the hand not holding his own on his left shoulder. "If we were dating I would stop you here and make sure you really want to deal with this today. Holidays are supposed to be happy, spent with people who want you to be happy and... I may be overstepping here but that doesn't sound like that's what your family wants. But if you want to have a relationship with these people, that's fine, and I'll go in there and support the hell out of you. I just want you to know you don't have to."

"I want to, she's my mom, you know?" He said quietly, and Richie nodded. "But if it gets to be too much, I'll let you know, and we can go. Thank you, Richie. You're really sweet." He reached up and brushed a stray curl out of Richie's eyes.

"As long as you're good, and we get dessert, I don't care where we go." He bit his lip and leaned down a little. "If... if this was real, I'd kiss you before we go in there. To make you smile, and let you know it's gonna be okay."

Eddie smiled, breathless. "Okay."

"Okay?" Richie smiled back, and Eddie's heart thumped in his chest as he nodded and tilted his head up to meet him. Richie's hand shifted to his cheek and he brushed his thumb across Eddie's cheekbone just as their lips met, softly and tentatively. It was brief, but warm and sweet, and when they pulled back, Eddie rose up on his toes to follow him on instinct, covering the movement by placing a small kiss on the tip of Richie's nose, making him wrinkle it and laugh.

They walked up the steps to the house hand in hand and Eddie tried to remember that this wasn't real, that Richie wasn't his to keep. But what if he could be?

Notes for the Chapter:

I couldn't help myself. Two chapters in one day, hot damn.

The Counting Crows song was Accidentally in Love, btw.

Tell me what you thought! I live for comments!

Bee

Author's Note:

You can also find me @reddietorun on tumblr and @eggbabeineminor on twitter, I'll be posting stuff about upcoming projects there, feel free to reach out!

Bee

4. Chapter 4

Eddie's mother opened the door and her eyes immediately flew to Eddie and Richie's joined hands. "Eddie, you're finally here! And you brought a friend!"

"Wh-" Eddie looked from his mom to Richie, to their joined hands and back to her face. "Ma, this is my *boyfriend*, Richie. I told you I was bringing the man I've been seeing."

Richie smiled at his mom like nothing was wrong, holding out a hand to shake, which she took with only the tips of her fingers. "It's great to meet you, Mrs. Kaspbrak. Thank you for inviting me."

Eddie tried to hold back a grin. Richie really was too good.

"Yes. Nice to meet you, too, Randy."

"It's *Richie*, Mom." He rolled his eyes. "Are you going to let us in, or are we having Christmas dinner on the front porch?" He was actually a little worried she wouldn't let them in, that he'd driven them here just to get turned away by his own mother.

"Of course. Your aunts are in the kitchen, and your uncle is in the living room, go say hi. Dinner will be ready in an hour." She ushered them into the front hall.

"An hour?" Richie whispered in his ear.

Eddie shrugged, wrapping an arm around Richie's waist as they walked through the door. "She said five, which means six. I would've brought you at six, but she would have called around a thousand times and then complained how late we were the entire time we were here."

"It's fine," he kissed the top of Eddie's head.

Eddie swallowed, "Um, so do you want a quick tour, babe?" He steered Richie away from the kitchen and living room to the left.

"Are you trying to lure me to your childhood bedroom to have your way with me?" Richie laughed and Eddie heard his mom gasp behind them.

He looked up at him with wide eyes, then decided his mom could just deal, and smiled mischievously at him and winked. "Come on, you menace." They walked out of sight down the hall, and he looked behind him to make sure his mom wasn't following them before he pulled his arm from Richie's waist. "My mom is going to kick us out if you're gonna say things like that."

Richie leaned a hip against the long table topped with pictures in the hall. "Too much?"

"No, it's fine, it was actually kind of funny. I've never brought anyone

home before, this is all very entertaining." He picked up a picture of himself around the age of 13. "She hasn't changed anything here since I was a kid, it's weird."

Richie looked over his shoulder at the picture, resting his hands on Eddie's hips and his chin on his right shoulder, even without anyone to see. Maybe it was just in case someone came through, but Eddie felt warm just the same. "You were adorable. Those shorts? What the hell, man."

"It was the eighties, dude, what was I supposed to wear?" He turned his head and laughed before realizing how close that put their faces.

"All I'm saying is my teen self would have lost his mind if he saw you in those shorts. Actually, do you still have them, because-" Richie yelped as Eddie shoved him.

"You're so full of it, Rich. Come on, I'll give you an actual tour." He took Richie's hand in his again, lacing their fingers together.

"I'm not ki-"

"Are you boys okay back here?" Eddie's aunt came around the corner and Eddie spun around.

"Yeah, Aunt Peggy, we're fine, I was just showing Richie some pictures." He let go of Richie's hand to hug her.

"Oh, honey, was it the picture with the red shorts, that isn't fair to your poor boyfriend." She laughed brightly and went over to hug Richie, too, who looked as surprised as Eddie felt. "He's a feisty thing, isn't he? Keeps you on your toes?" She pinched Richie's cheek and he laughed.

"Boy, does he." Richie looked over at Eddie, his arm still slung loosely around Aunt Peggy's shoulder, with an expression that clearly said 'what is happening here?'

Eddie had no idea. Peggy had always been his favorite aunt, but she'd also always been quiet and unassuming, and the smile on her face was something he'd never seen.

"I'm really proud of you, Eddie. Moving out of this town, getting a great job. Not to mention standing up to your mom and bringing your boyfriend here at Christmas. I always knew you had guts, kid."

"I- What? You're," he looked incredulously at her, shooting a glance back toward the kitchen, where he could hear his mom and younger aunt bickering. "This isn't exactly the reaction I was expecting, Ma's been just short of cold, she's barely said anything to me, and refused to even believe I liked men in the first place until I actually brought one home, but you're just...?"

"We all love who we love, kiddo. And not all of us are brave enough to tell our families." She came over to him, putting her hands on either side of his face. "You're living your life, and you seem happier than I've seen you in... well, ever. I never thought you'd get out from under her thumb. I'm *really* proud of you." She smiled at him, that

same big enigmatic smile he'd never seen before tonight. "Come into the kitchen when you're done with your tour, dear, I'd love to catch up and get to know Richie." And then she was gone.

Eddie stared at the back of her head as she walked away. "What just happened?" He looked back at Richie.

"I think... I think you actually have a cool family member, Eds." Richie was looking at where she'd turned the corner speculatively. "Now let's get on with that tour!"

...

There hadn't been all that much to show Richie on that side of the house, besides where the bathroom was, the door to his mom's room, and his own unchanged childhood room. So they made their way to the kitchen, sitting next to each other at the small breakfast table. Richie had Eddie's hand in his lap and he was playing with his fingers while he talked, mostly to Aunt Peggy, but occasionally answering a question about the drive or the city from his other aunt, Jean. His mother was silent, mashing potatoes with a grim look on her face.

Peggy laughed as Richie made a joke, and Eddie looked at him. He was smiling and looked comfortable, but his leg was jiggling up and down under their joined hands, and it reminded him that Richie was acting, that as much as Eddie had started to want this to be something, it wasn't, not for Richie. He was here to help out Eddie, and he cared to some extent, but the nervous way he played with Eddie's fingers in his lap betrayed how out of his element he was.

"Eddie, I know Richie is pretty, but could you quit staring and join the conversation?" Aunt Peggy poked him with the handle of a wooden spoon.

"I wasn't... I," Eddie blushed and tried to play it off before realizing he shouldn't if they think he's in love with Richie anyway. "Yeah, okay. You caught me. Ma, do you want help with the potatoes?"

His mom perked up for the first time since they'd gotten there. "Oh, thank you, Eddie-bear. My wrist is starting to ache, I should go get my brace and some pain meds. Don't overmash them!" She handed him the masher and kissed him on the cheek before leaving the room.

"I worry about your poor mother, Eddie." Aunt Jean spoke up. "All alone here, it's not right. And she worries about you more than herself, which only makes it worse. You should really come home and take care of her instead of gallivanting in the city."

Richie scoffed and started to say something, and Eddie quickly interrupted him. "She's fine, Aunt Jean, and I like the city. And my job is there, and Richie and my friends. My life is there now. She knows that."

"But-"

"I just realized," Aunt Peggy interrupted, bless her. "I never asked how the two of you met. I'd love to hear the story." She smiled at them like her sister wasn't sputtering behind her at being interrupted.

Somehow they hadn't come up with a story for this yet, and Eddie froze. Richie spoke up smoothly, "Oh it was love at first sight, Peggy." Eddie laughed as Richie put the back of one hand to his forehead and fanned himself with the other. "I opened the door to the coffee shop for an unfairly cute man, our Eddie over there, and had to say something to get him to look at me so I told him to have a nice day and you know what he said to me? I'll never forget, I *swooned*."

Eddie laughed, knowing Richie it would be something ridiculous. "Rich, come on." He played along.

"What did he say?" Peggy was already chuckling at Richie's antics.

"He looked me dead in the eye and said 'don't tell me what to do', all grumpy." He pouted at Eddie.

Eddie's jaw dropped. To be fair, that definitely sounded like something he'd do. "I was having a bad day! And I apologized later." He made up, knowing Richie would follow the improvisation.

"You came back and found him?" Peggy asked.

Eddie chuckled, "Yeah, sort of. I was, uh. Late to work that day so I didn't even think about it until later when I realized how rude I'd been and also how cute Richie was, but I went to that coffee shop every day after until I ran into him like a week later." He blushed into the potatoes he was mashing.

"It was my regular coffee shop, but I have odd hours with my job so I was never there at the same time. But we found each other eventually." Riche smiled over at him and he put down the masher, biting his lip before walking over.

"I'm lucky we did." He said, and leaned down to kiss him softly on the lips.

His mother came back into the room as they kissed and cleared her throat. "Eddie, and you done with the potatoes?" Eddie startled and stood up straight.

"Uh, yeah." He sat back down next to Richie.

She walked over to the pot and started mashing them further. "These aren't done."

"You said you didn't want them overma-"

"What is it you do for a living, Richie, that gives you such odd hours?" His mother interrupted, speaking to Richie for the first time since they'd gotten there.

"Oh, I'm a bartender part time, and I have a pretty regular spot doing a comedy show most weekends at a club downtown."

"So you don't have a real job, then." She said bluntly.

"Mom." Eddie started. Richie took his hand.

"It's fine, Eds. My parents didn't get it at first either, but I'm comfortable. I've actually been bartending less than I used to because the comedy gig is starting to gain traction. I've been picking up shows in other states, I'm actually planning on going on a tour down the east coast next year." Richie took a sip of his coffee and looked smugly back at Sonia.

"So you're not mooching off my successful son, then?" She fired back and Richie's eyes went wide. "Riding on his coattails so you can keep doing your little shows? Keeping my son around for the money"

"Of course I'm not. He and I have very different jobs, but that doesn't mean mine isn't providing. I have my own apartment, two bedrooms, no roommates. I'm perfectly self sufficient. I keep Eddie around because he's kind, and funny, and loving, and smart, and because he makes every day better just by being around. Not just because he's supportive of me, but because we support each other." Richie looked at Eddie, and back at his mother. "I love your son, Mrs. Kaspbrak. I want him to be happy."

"He was plenty happy before, when he was here. I don't underst-"

"No, I wasn't." Eddie heard the words come from his mouth before he realized he'd said them. He felt Richie squeeze his hand and he stood up, facing his mother, keeping Richie's hand in his. "I was never happy here. You never let me be who I am, who I wanted to be. You dictated everything, all the time, and that just... Ma, it took *so long* for me to get out and realize I could be better. That I could be happy."

You almost took that from me, but in the end, I didn't let you, and I think that infuriates you. Because every time I come home, you try to mold be back into what you wanted. But you can't." He pulled at Richie's hand until he stood next to him. "I get to be happy, Mom. And you can't take it away from me." He looked over at Aunt Jean, who was red in the face, a hand over her mouth, then to Aunt Peggy, whose smile was bright enough to light the room. "I'm sorry, I can't do this anymore. I can't keep trying to get you to love me, Ma. Me, not the person you think I should be. Aunt Peggy, you have my number?" She nodded. "Great. Rich, babe, you were right. Holidays should be spent with people who make me happy, who want me to be happy. Do you want to get out of here?" He asked him, looking in his eyes and hoping he knew there was more meaning behind the question.

Richie's smile was almost too big for his face. "Absolutely. Just let me-" He took two steps, stuck his finger in the mashed potatoes, licked them off and looked at Eddie's mom. "Those are definitely overmashed, Mrs. Kaspbrak." He said, faux-serious, before running for the door, grabbing Eddie's hand on his way past as Sonia shrieked and threw the masher, still covered in potatoes, at him, missing by a mile.

He could still hear Aunt Peggy laughing when they got to the car.

Richie laughed as they both slammed their doors shut. "That was so brave, Eddie, holy shit, you were amazing in there, I-"

Eddie nearly climbed over the center console, pulling Richie to face him with a hand on his jaw. "Can I do one more brave thing?" He licked his lips and waited for an answer.

"Fuck, yes, you can." Richie squeaked as Eddie kissed him almost before he could get the words all the way out, quick and hard.

"Let's get out of here. We have time for more of that later." He started the car, then looked hesitantly back at Richie. "I mean, if you...?"

"Yes. Abso-fucking-lutely. But first?" Richie smiled at him, his eyes crinkled at the corners, as he laced their fingers together on the center console. "You owe me dessert."

Notes for the Chapter:

Ahhh only one more chapter to go!! Honestly, this story didn't go AT ALL how I thought it would, but it just flowed right out so I'm happy with it.

Please let me know what you thought, I love to hear from people.

Bee

Author's Note:

You can also find me @reddietorun on tumblr and @eggbabeineminor on twitter, I'll be posting stuff about upcoming projects there, feel free to reach out!

Also! I'm part of a fledgling Reddie discord, and we'd love to have more people! <https://discord.gg/fqWZ3hP>

Bee